



Reconnecting Wairoa

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Fun week
back at
school in
Frasertown

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DAWN PROCESSION: Hundreds joined the memorial hikoi that began at the showgrounds on Ruataniwha Road.

Wairoa reflects

A MORNING to reflect and remember. Before sunrise last Wednesday, hundreds gathered at the entrance to the A&P Showgrounds to walk where the waters of the Wairoa River had come crashing through Ruataniwha Road and much of North Clyde.

In the early morning shadows, Wairoa Recovery manager Benita Tahuri spoke before the hikoi began following a karakia from Wairoa District Council chief executive Kitea Tipuna.

“Let us walk together, let us reflect, be calm and continue to hold our heads high.”

Across 1.8km, the human convoy walked along as dawn and sunrise lit up the horizon.

The mood was reflective and there was a subtle hum of noise but mainly the

hikoi proceeded along North Clyde in silence.

For Michelle McIlroy what happened on February 14, 2023, will never leave her.

The Ruataniwha Road resident ran down the road alerting people to the oncoming torrent.

“You relive the memory, as I was on the hikoi. I was remembering the places I’d stopped in on to warn people.

“I was reliving the trauma. But it was nice to walk with our people and the main thing is, we did not lose anyone.

“You hear other people’s memories and the trauma is still there.”

Mrs McIlroy says uncertainty still lingers for residents not yet back in their homes.

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Te Rerenga Kotuku light up stage

TE Rerenga Kotuku kapa haka rōpu returned in style after a lengthy absence from the performance space.

The gymnasium at Wairoa College was their stage as hundreds vied for prime viewing of the performance that lit up the afternoon with waiata and te reo.

Barely 10 minutes after the doors opened, the seating and sitting areas were full to the brim.

The dress rehearsal was in preparation for the Ngāti Kahungunu kapa haka regional competition this Saturday at the Dannevirke A&P Showgrounds.

Te Rerenga Kotuku kapa haka founder and tutor Sheree Cotter-Spooner felt a sense of pride.

“I felt really proud to be back and to represent Wairoa and Kahungunu really well.

“I was blown away by the turnout.”

The performance was testament to the mahi behind the scenes, Ms Cotter-Spooner says.

“We were up at 4am, knitting uniforms.

“We started training back in September so 14 weekends from Friday to Saturday, practising, composing and choreographing — thousands of hours have gone into this.”

Speaking to those in attendance beforehand, Ms Cotter-Spooner said the

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performance was a tribute to founding members and to former leader JB Heperi-Smith who took his life last July.

“He was a part of kapa haka since 1971 and had been with us since 2005, we wanted to acknowledge his performances and give him a fitting send-off.”

The four-year absence from the competition allowed the team to grieve following the death of Ms Cotter-Spooner’s husband Elliot, who established the group together back in 1992.

“Elliot’s death was in October, 2015, and there was no time to properly grieve that loss.

“We took a break to do things as a team that we could not do while we were competing — like study or go and attend other kapa haka competitions.”

There was a nagging fear that perhaps it would be the last time Te Rerenga Kotuku graced the stage and would not return to defend their eight straight regional titles.

“We had a 16-year momentum and then,

when we took a break, we wondered if we would have a team when we came back, and the worry for some was that we would not be back.”

The significance of the performance was outlined by the energy of the crowd and the precision of the performers.

“The goal was to work hard as a unit. We will watch the run back and strategise.

“This is like the rugby world cup for us.”

Ms Cotter-Spooner explained the six items that make up the performance.

“They are individually marked and then the collective score decides the winner. You have the entry, the moteatea (traditional item), poi, waiata-ō-ringa (action song), haka and finish with a whakawātea (exit song).”

A change in government and attitude towards Māori will not stop the passion, says Ms Cotter-Spooner.

“We will speak our reo and sing our waiata.

“What we have strived with Kotuku is being able to fundraise ourselves and have full autonomy with no government funding or control and having someone else telling us what to do.

“Today showed what Māori can do when we have control.”

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